the DNA synthesizing activity but lacks the 5' nuclease activity) has been described as having a physical form resembling a right hand, having an open region called the "palm", and a cleft that holds the primer/template duplex defined on one side by a "fingers" domain and on the other by a "thumb" domain (Joyce and Steitz, Trends in Biochemical Science 12:288 [1987]). This is shown schematically in Figure 5. Because this physical form has proved to be common to all Pol A DNA polymerases and to a number of additional template-dependent polymerizing enzymes such as reverse transcriptases, the hand terminology has become known in the art, and the sites of activity in these enzymes are often described by reference to their position on the hand. For reference, and not intended as a limitation on the present invention, the palm is created from roughly the first 200 amino acids of the polymerase domain, the thumb from the middle 140, and the fingers by the next 160, with the base of the cleft formed from the remaining regions (Figures 6). Although some enzymes may deviate from these structural descriptions, the equivalent domains and sequences corresponding to such domains may be identified by sequence homology to known enzyme sequences, by comparison of enzyme crystal structures, and other like methods.

In creating the improved enzymes of the present invention, several approaches have been taken, although the present invention in not limited to any particular approach. First two DNA polymerases, Taq and Tth, that have different rates of DNA strand cleavage activity on RNA targets were compared. To identify domains related to the differences in activity, a series of chimerical constructs was created and the activities were measured. This process identified two regions of the Tth polymerase that could, if transferred into the Taq polymerase, confer on the TaqPol an RNA-dependent cleavage activity equivalent to that of the native Tth protein. Once these regions were identified, the particular amino acids involved in the activity were examined. Since the two proteins are about 87 percent identical in amino acid sequence overall, the identified regions had only a small number of amino acid differences. By altering these amino acids singly and in combinations, a pair of amino acids were identified in TthPol that, if introduced into the TaqPol protein, increased the rate of cleavage up to that of the native TthPol.

These data demonstrate two important aspects of the present invention. First, specific amino acids can be changed to confer TthPol-like RNA-dependent cleavage activity on a